Chapter 115
Narrative

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Category: Processes of Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

Narrative or the use of stories is an ancient discipline. Our ancestors evolved the ability to see the world through a set of abstractions, and thereby enabled the development of sophisticated language and the ability to use stories as a primary mechanism for knowledge transfer. The oral-history tradition was the only method of knowledge transfer for many eons and persists into the current day despite the prevalence of the written word. First Nation elders in Canada passing on their wisdom to young people facing the conflicts of old and new, a Seanachie (the Irish word that means far more than storyteller) ensconced with an enraptured audience around a peat fire, the Liars bench of the Midwest in the USA where old timers sit to swap tall tales, and the ubiquitous watercooler conversations of the modern organisation: all evidence the persistence of story. The archetypal story form of the myths of the Greek gods and the trickster stories of Native Americans find modern expression and use in Dilbert cartoons, and the old fairy stories of Europe find new expression in Hollywood. Good teachers always tell stories to provide context and life to otherwise dull material. Anyone joining an organisation will take months or years to hear and reexpress the key stories of past success and failure that form a key part of the organisation's deep culture. Executives who abandon the tyranny of PowerPoint and instead tell a story rooted in their own experience nearly always discover the power of story to move people; to quote Steve Denning (2000), one of the early pioneers with his work in the World Bank—"Nothing else would do."

However, for a period at the end of the last century, business forgot about the value of stories; perhaps the form was too familiar or maybe too ambiguous for the process-driven focus on cost reduction and efficiency that dominated manage-

ment thinking in the 1980s and '90s. Maybe with our newfound discovery and neo-fetishist use of technology, we simply lost the space that story had occupied in our lives: The television remote control that provides multiple choices and short attention spans simply muscled out the attention span necessary for a good story. However, story has persisted, and when J. K. Rowling had the courage to write a 766-page story of a boy wizard, children across the world queued up overnight and then sat down and read it from cover to cover within hours. The author's own 12-year-old son sat down with the full director's cut of *The Lord of the Rings* during Christmas 2004 and watched it from opening scene to closing scene with only brief interruptions for food and sleep.

Story is remarkably persistent and the narrative form surprisingly effective, if not efficient, in both communicating and storing knowledge. As such, it is not surprising that it was rediscovered rapidly by some knowledge management (KM) practitioners who had to deal with the postprocess reengineering need to manage uncodified and often unstructured human knowledge. Indeed, we have now reached the point where narrative may have outgrown knowledge management and become a management discipline in its own right.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE KNOWLEDGE?

Figure 1 is adapted from Boisot's (1998) I-Space, which looks at three aspects of knowledge-information flow, namely, abstraction, codification, and diffusion. At the bottom left-hand extreme of the model we have the uncodified and deeply concrete knowledge of the person who just knows: the Zen archer who is so in tune with his or her bow, the arrow, and the environment that he or she draws, shoots, and hits the target without opening his or her eyes; the modern equivalent is the London taxi driver whose two plus years of training involves driving the streets of London on a motor scooter

Figure 1. The necessary ambiguity of narrative (adapted from Boisot's [1998] I-Space)
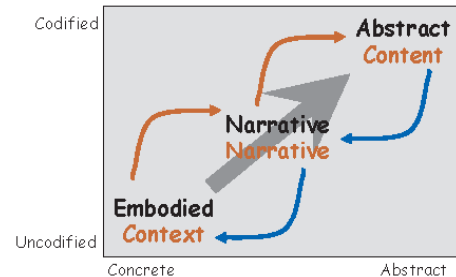
until the patterns of navigation are so imprinted on the brain that a part of his or her hypothalamus is larger than that in other humans. The taxi driver, like the Zen archer, *just knows*. In contrast, at the top right we have the abstracted knowledge of the corporate database, or the novice reading the manual. The knowledge exists and has value, but the user lacks direct experience.

One key insight from I-Space is that the more abstracted and codified the knowledge, the easier it is for that knowledge to diffuse to a large population: It is independent of the knowledge holder. This fact was the driving force behind much early KM effort supported by the emphasis on tacit to explicit knowledge conversion that followed the widespread adoption of Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) SECI model. The goal of knowledge management was to render an organisation's knowledge into as abstract and codified a form as possible: the corporate database of best practices, a yellow-pages directory of skills, or a community of practice confined to the input capabilities of a QWERTY keyboard. The argument was that knowledge was not an organisational asset until it existed independently of the knowledge owner.

In a world separated into tacit and explicit knowledge, it is obviously undesirable for key knowledge to be solely tacit or concrete. The sharing of knowledge, enabling rapid diffusion, and the deployment of knowledge are sensible goals, and the conversion of tacit to explicit, or concrete to abstract, knowledge has thus driven knowledge

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